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Beyond the Freeze

The House freeze debate, mobilizing scores of congressmen on both sides and delaying many other urgent actions, demonstrated that preventing nuclear war has become a premier mainstream concern.

For decades, the public by and large left strategic issues to the executive branch. No one in government, least of all Congress, foresaw the stunning growth of the freeze idea, particularly at a time when bread-and-butter issues were becoming more intense.

What took place was a kind of chain reaction. After the glow of détente began to fade, Americans slowly realized that U.S.-Soviet relations were deteriorating. Soviet military power continued to develop and, in Afghanistan, the Soviets drove home to a new political generation the fresh lesson that they were prepared to use naked power.

Most Americans still believed our leaders would manage disagreements with the Kremlin in a fashion to avoid any flirtation with nuclear war. But the Reagan administration's bellicose anti-Soviet rhetoric, combined with its careless and often uninformed references to nuclear war, gave rise to a fear that the distance between political conflict and nuclear catastrophe was narrowing.

There remained an abiding faith that good old American technology would come up with the design for invulnerable nuclear forces and with the means to use them to intimidate the Soviets at minimal risk to ourselves. That idea also died a hard death, as successive schemes for basing the MX were unveiled and dismissed, and as MX proponents made clear its importance to them as the centerpiece in nightmare scenarios for "nuclear war fighting."

The freeze concept was born in the minds of analysts conversant with nuclear strategy and exasperated by the failure of traditional approaches to arms control. It was an idea sim-

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ple, audacious and available at a time when the American people realized that humanity was in profound danger.

Whether or not its intellectual premises have been vindicated, freeze forces have challenged the foundations of orthodoxy and shown that the freeze compares favorably to the Byzantine scenarios that led to "dense pack" and "racetrack" before it. They have forced the experts to revisit the essence of the issue: not how best to design imaginary geopolitical scenarios but how best to save civilization from the horror of nuclear destruction.

Sophisticated critics of the freeze resolution seized upon qualifications made in the debate as evidence that the idea and the movement behind it suffered an intellectual and moral defeat. But that the freeze remained unacceptable to the president in a sense confirms its victory. The final vote in the House was therefore the closest we can come to a vote of no confidence.

Were this to be the only outcome, we would now be facing a bleak prospect: yet another president at bay, and unable to lead; a country polarized and unable to support coherent policy; the Soviets at liberty to develop their strengths and play on our weaknesses.

Fortunately, however, something else has occurred. The House has realized that the freeze was not an end in



itself but a proposal for a new beginning. Moreover, there now appears to be a consensus that in this new beginning we must try not only to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world but also to ensure that nuclear relationships are kept stable. All sides of the debate seem to realize we must eliminate the conditions that would make either superpower fear the other has the means and, therefore, may be harboring the ambition, to carry out a nuclear coup: a first strike that would leave the victim with the choice of submission or suicide.

The president, perhaps to his own surprise, now finds himself approaching the same idea, albeit from his own perspective. Because Congress proposed to choose between his conduct of arms control and the audacious freeze, it was imperative for him to make his conduct in arms control and arms planning more persuasive. That led him to expand the charter of the Scowcroft Commission to encompass arms control, and to embrace its recommendations, even though they are in many ways contrary to his original goals.

I believe, along with many of my colleagues, that the long-term recommendations of the report are correct. Arms control and nuclear weapons decisions need to be integrated into a common strategy focused on the pursuit of stability. Stability requires that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union possess the means to conduct even a theoretically advantageous first strike. Insofar as the development of increasingly more numerous and accurate MIRVed warheads leads toward first-strike capabilities, we must reverse that trend. We can do so by moving toward less threatening nuclear forces with fewer warheads on each side compared to the number of missile silos on the other side, ideally in a transition orchestrated through arms control.

The president still wants the MX, although he asserts that its deployment is now needed as part of a strategy for achieving the longer-term objectives of the commission report. How this can be so, he has not demonstrated. He correctly sees the idea of a small, single-warhead ICBM as a way to move toward nuclear stability, but the Pentagon suggests that this idea is a price it is willing to pay.

ing to pay only under duress, in order to get the MX.

The president asserts that he intends eventually to blend these ideas into a new approach to START, but he states that his existing proposals in Geneva are completely consistent with the Scowcroft recommendations, which they are not.

Once again, the initiative and the burden fall to the Congress and especially to the House. There, a vote in favor of the president's proposals is far more difficult, given all that has happened, than in the Senate. But the Congress, too, has changed. Because of the freeze, there is now some of the same sense of nuance and detail in nuclear matters that formerly was reserved for tax laws and highway construction bills.

Ronald Reagan now has what no other president has had: a Congress that is able to engage in a dialogue on the problems of the nuclear age and that is motivated to support a line of march that makes sense.

Last Monday, two letters—one from a group of senators, the other from a group of representatives—went to the president. Consistent on basic points, they say that agreement is possible with the president on the basis of the Scowcroft Commission report, but that Congress must have at the beginning and at critical points along the way 1) his assurances of support for the report and 2) evidence that he is moving vigorously on arms control and on serious technical questions hanging over MX and the single-warhead ICBM.

The self-education of the House was the result of a political imperative. It makes possible, together with the Scowcroft report and the president's endorsement of it, the beginning of a second round of informed and constructive debate. This debate must turn on a crisply defined objective: stability through arms control. It provides the basis for a durable bipartisan consensus. That, too, should be counted as a victory for the freeze.

MX!
The writer, a Democratic representative from Tennessee, is a member of the House Intelligence Committee.

* no budget!

*Does earlier proposal
rule out deployment
of MX (and even D-5?)*